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SUBJECT: NSC Senior Director Michael Green Discusses Religion with Protestant Church Leader

Reference: A) 04 Hanoi 3257; B) 04 Hanoi 1987; C) Hanoi 353

11. (SBU) Summary: According to a senior Evangelical Church of Vietnam: North (ECVN) representative, the GVN has provided new freedom to the Church, despite not yet having released implementing regulations for the Ordinance on Religion. Now that the GVN has permitted (after a 20-year delay) the ECVN to hold its Congress and appoint a new Management Board, obtaining GVN permission to build new churches and train new leaders is the ECVN's top priority. The Church would also like to see the Central Government publicize the implementing regulations of the Ordinance on Religion and publicly affirm the legitimacy of Protestant practice. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Visiting NSC Senior Director for Asia Dr. Michael J. Green met February 5 with Au Quang Vinh, Pastor of the ECVN's Hanoi church, at the ECVN's headquarters in Hanoi. Poloff accompanied. Vinh told Green that "Christian followers" in Vietnam appreciate the policies and statements of the United States regarding religious freedom in Vietnam. In past years, Pastor Vinh said, "we have had many difficulties." Recently, however, things have improved. In particular, Vinh mentioned the December 2004 Congress of the ECVN, the first such Congress in 20 years. "We told the Government that we would only hold our Congress if they respected our operating principles and allowed us to select our own Management Board," Vinh explained. "Now they have done so" (Ref. A).

13. (SBU) Now that the Management Board has been selected and recognized, the main challenge is to increase the number of pastors and churches, Vinh said. Vinh put the number of Protestant believers in northern Vietnam as "more than 100,000" despite the fact that the ECVN has only 14 pastors and churches. (Note: Most of these believers are ethnic minorities in the Northwest Highlands. The ECVN has no official churches in that region, but remains in contact with many house churches. End note.) "In the coming period," Vinh said, "we will ask the Government for permission to open a school to train pastors and will also request that the Government recognize ECVN congregations in border provinces so that they can carry out normal activities." The biggest obstacle to normal church activities is "local authorities who do not understand the religious beliefs and practices of followers." Vinh also said he wants to improve the condition of existing churches.

14. (SBU) To serve adequately the existing number of followers, the ECVN needs 1,000 new churches, Vinh stated. Construction of new churches "can be very difficult," he acknowledged, citing as an example the ECVN's efforts to build a newer, bigger church in Hanoi on existing land. This effort has been hampered by the Hanoi city government, based on the ECVN's lack of a certificate of land use rights to back its claim that the land the church sits on was given to the ECVN by the Christian and Missionary Alliance in 1954, Vinh said. (Note: The certificate of land use rights acts like a land title or deed in Vietnam. It is nearly impossible to get permission to improve a property in Vietnam when the ownership is not adequately documented. End note.)

15. (SBU) Vinh acknowledged "a number of new and better points" in the Ordinance on Religion (Ref. B), although he noted that since the Ordinance's release in November 2004 there has so far been no implementation decree. A key factor in the Ordinance's effectiveness will be the degree to which local authorities understand and abide by it. "In many areas," Vinh complained, "local authorities act as if they have no knowledge of the law or regulations." The ECVN's plan is to "carry out the law of Vietnam through the Commission on Religious Affairs and ask the Commission to respect our legitimate demands and understand that we do not want armed struggle." All the ECVN needs to construct its churches is permission, Vinh said. "Protestants all over the world will support us."

16. (SBU) The implementing regulations of the new Ordinance on Religion will be the crucial factor in assessing whether the Ordinance is useful or not, Vinh continued. "In

Vietnam, the law opens a large door but the implementing regulations close a smaller one," he explained. The implementing regulations will determine how local authorities understand and comply with the law. The Central Government can assist by making it known that Protestantism is lawful and formally recognized. (Note: As reported in Reftel C, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai issued on February 4 (but did not publicize until February 16) an Instruction to guide Ministries and People's Committees in their relations with Protestant churches and believers. The document directs authorities to assist Protestant followers in celebrating their faith, including by opening churches, registering pastors and allowing denominations operating since 1975 to register their religious practice, even if they do not yet meet all criteria for official recognition. End Note.) "In many local areas, it is thought that Protestantism is the United States, and the United States is the enemy," Vinh said. "All we want is fair treatment for Protestantism like any other religion in Vietnam." The ECVN's new Managing Board plans to test the waters by "asking for permission to open a training center for pastors this summer." In a "few days," the ECVN will submit a plan to the Committee on Religious Affairs concerning the work of their church, including the issues of church construction, training of religious workers and the opening of bible schools. So far, Vinh said, the religious freedom changes in Vietnam have been good for his church. There are new pastors in Lang Son Province and Hai Phong City, and the GVN gave the ECVN permission to hold a Congress, elect leaders and establish a work plan. Vinh added that he believes that this progress has come about as a result of USG pressure on the GVN, and that in the future the two sides should establish visits and exchanges to improve bilateral relations and religious freedom.

17. (SBU) Comment: Pastor Vinh was distinctly upbeat during this meeting. In the past, he has been guardedly positive about religious freedom, but full of frustration about the conduct of authorities. This time, he seemed to be looking forward to the GVN's implementing positive changes, possibly because of the success of the EVCN Congress in December and the new vigor it has given the church after 20 years of delays. End Comment.

18. (U) Dr. Green has cleared this message.

MARINE